

Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*¹

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There is a broad consensus among Western scholars that the long Medinan *sūras* exhibit neither coherent structure nor thematic unity; they are baskets of leftovers, ragbags of originally unrelated material.² Recent attempts by some Muslim commentators, including the late Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī,³ to prove the contrary, are usually dismissed on the grounds that they are a reaction against Western criticisms of the Qur'an and against the verse-by-verse approach of the classical commentators.⁴ In addition, Welch alleges that the subjectivity of their work is evident from the fact that 'various writers ... identify different central themes for the same *sūra*'.⁵

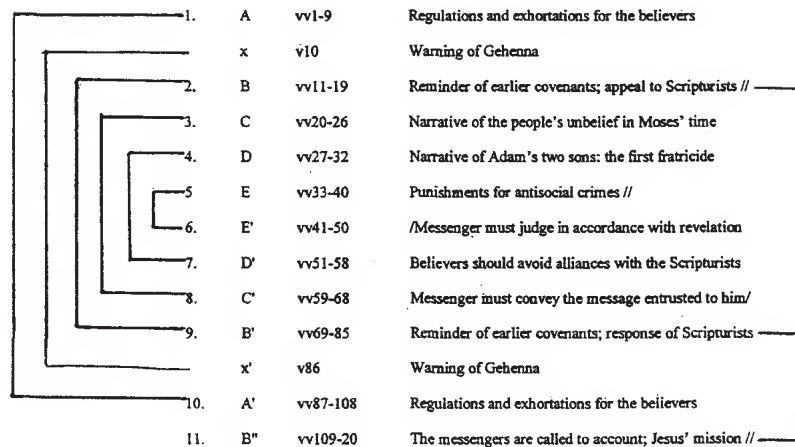
Elsewhere, I have broken with the consensus and argued that there is at least one long Medinan *sūra*, *Sūrat al-Baqara*, which does have a coherent structure.⁶ Although I consider that my analysis was substantially correct, I acknowledge that I failed to pay sufficient attention to the problem of identifying the main sections of the *sūra*,⁷ with the result that my work may have appeared somewhat impressionistic. For this reason, in the present article, which is devoted to *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*, I will focus primarily on the macro-structure of the *Sūra*. This will entail suggesting criteria by which the main sections may be identified and their interrelationship described. Questions concerning the thematic unity of the *Sūra*, its purpose, the stages of its composition, and its historical context, will be discussed on a later occasion.

1. The Proposed Plan of the *Sūra*

It will be argued that the *Sūra* comprises eleven main sections. In addition there are two identical freestanding *āyas* (designated x and x' in the plan) that give dire warning of Gehenna. Sections 2, 5 and 11 each have similar endings characterised by an accumulation of theological formulae that stress Allāh's omnipotence and all-embracing sovereignty. The similarity between the beginning of Section 6 and the end of Section 8 implies that Sections 6, 7 and 8 form a larger sequence. The first ten sections are arranged chiastically, with Section 1 corresponding to Section 10 as A to A', Section 2 corresponding to Section 9 as B to B', and so forth. The second member of each pair of corresponding sections is invariably longer than the first. The eleventh and final section might seem to fall outside the chiasmus. It will be shown later, however, that it corresponds both to Section 2 and to Section 9. The overall plan of the *Sūra* is summarised in *Figure 1*. Note that the brief descriptions of the

Figure 1: Plan of the Sūra

Plan of Sura 5 Showing the Chiastic Structure



sections, to the right of the verse numbers, have been furnished for ease of reference. The reader should not infer that each section has a single theme or that the descriptions are definitive

2. Rationale of the Division into Sections

In the modern world, most literate people are accustomed to dealing with documents that are furnished with subheadings and broken into paragraphs. Hence, when they read the Qur'an, they tend almost instinctively to divide the *sūras* into sections on the basis of changes in subject matter. In my experience, this is the case even with Muslims who can recite many of the *sūras* from memory. Like everyone else, they are part of a culture that has long been dominated by the conventions of the written word. If approached with this mindset, *Sūrat al-Mā'idā* is highly problematic for it seems in places to be a mosaic of unrelated fragments. Consider, for instance, the first nineteen *āyas*. The first sentence, 'O you who believe, fulfil your obligations' appears unrelated to what follows. The rest of vv1-5, although seemingly rather disjointed, could be considered a little section dealing primarily with dietary regulations. They are followed by v6, which deals with ritual purification, then by vv7-14, which focus on the various covenants established by God. Finally, in vv15-19, there is a direct address to the People of the Scripture. However, in the early days of Islam, the Qur'an was primarily an oral-aural phenomenon. Therefore, if we wish to establish criteria for identifying the *sūra* sections, we must be attentive listeners. When listening to someone reciting the Qur'an, it is hard to detect a change in subject matter unless

there is a verbal cue, for instance a stereotyped formula of the sort that introduce the narratives. On the other hand, the listener may often sense a transition in the discourse on the basis of verbal cues, regardless of whether or not these are followed by obvious changes in subject matter. I contend that anyone who approaches *Sūrat al-Mā'idā* with this in mind will arrive at an analysis very like the one that I am proposing.

Most of the verbal cues on which the division into sections is based involve an element of repetition. This usually takes one of the following six forms:

- i. The first and last *āya* of the section may both begin in the same distinctive way.
- ii. An unusual phrase that occurs in the second *āya* of the section may be repeated in the penultimate *āya* thereby forming an inclusion.
- iii. The section may be rounded off by the recurrence of similar or identical phraseology in the antepenultimate and penultimate *āyas* or in the last three *āyas*.
- iv. A key word or phrase may recur repeatedly throughout the section but be absent from the preceding and following sections.
- v. The section may end in an eschatological climax expressed in stereotyped formulae that are familiar from earlier revelations.
- vi. The section may end in an accumulation of stereotyped theological formulae.

Let us now work through the *sūra* section by section and note the verbal cues in the order that they are encountered.

In Section 1, vv1, 2, 6 and 8 begin 'O you who believe'¹⁰ (*yā āyyūh 'ladhīna āmanū*) and vv2, 4, 7 and 8 include the expression 'and be mindful of Allāh (*wa 'ttaqū 'llāha*). Both of these phrases are commonplace. They are found frequently in passages of the Qur'an that contain regulations and exhortations for the Muslim community. They serve to give cohesion to the section. However, as both expressions recur in v11, the reader may wonder why I do not consider that Section 1 continues down to the end of that *āya*. Part of the answer will be given later, when we examine the various ways in which consecutive sections are linked. For the moment, suffice it to note that there are two verbal cues that indicate that the section ends with v9. The first is the occurrence in both v2 and v8 of the words 'let not detestation for a people move you' (*lā yajrimannākum shannū qawmin*). This injunction is very distinctive as it is not attested elsewhere in the Qur'an. It gives symmetry to the section, occurring in the middle of the second *āya* and of the *āya* before last. On hearing this inclusion, the attentive listener infers that the section is probably drawing to a close. The correctness of this inference is confirmed by the second verbal cue, which is given in

v9. This whole *āya* is found verbatim in two earlier revelations: Q.35:7, where it marks the end of a section, and Q.48:29, where it is the conclusion of the *sūra*. Moreover, many other *sūras* have sections that end in a similarly worded eschatological crescendo.

The eschatological note continues in v10, which warns that unbelievers are destined for Gehenna. The same warning is repeated verbatim in v86. The decision to treat them both as freestanding *āya* is based on recognition of the symmetrical structure of Section 1, and of the overall chiastic structure of the *Sūra*.

Section 2 extends from v11 to v19. The conclusion of the section is signalled by the repetition of stereotyped phrases at or near the end of the last three *āyas*. Thus, vv17 and 18 both contain the phrase 'Allāh' is the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth', and vv18 and 19 both end 'Allāh is able to do all things'. We noted earlier that vv15–19 are addressed to the People of the Scripture and that some readers might therefore think that they constitute a distinct section in their own right. For that analysis to be valid, however, there would have to be grounds for thinking that the preceding *āyas*, vv12–14, also constituted a section. As there are none, it is preferable to treat vv12–14 and vv15–19 as two subsections of a single section. That this is correct will be confirmed later when we examine how Section 2 corresponds to Section 9 in the overall chiastic structure.

Section 3 is a brief narrative. Hence, there is an obvious change in genre. This is signalled by the standard Medinan narrative-introduction 'And when ...' (*wa 'idh*). The section is rounded off by the occurrence of the words 'the transgressing people' (*al-qawmi'l-fāsiqīn*) at the end of the last two *āyas*, vv25 and 26.

Section 4 begins with another brief narrative, but it features different characters and is introduced with a different formula. The narrative itself is rounded off by means of repetition, although in this instance there is a slight variation in the wording: v30 ends 'and he became of the losers' (*fa'aṣbaḥa min al-khāsirīn*) whereas v31 ends 'and he became of the remorseful' (*fa'aṣbaḥa min al-nādimīn*). However, the section does not end there but with v32, which mentions what God subsequently decreed. The first words of v32, 'Because of that' (*min ajli dhālika*) indicate a close connection with the preceding material. Moreover, this rider to the story is also found in the *Mishnah*.¹¹

Section 5, vv33–40, focuses principally on the punishments for antisocial crimes. The rhyme clause of the second *āya*, v34, is 'Allāh is Forgiving, Merciful'. When this recurs as the rhyme clause of v39, the listener suspects that this may be the penultimate *āya* of the section. This is confirmed in v40 by the occurrence of the stereotyped phrases, 'Allāh's is the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth' and 'Allāh is able to do all things', which were encountered earlier in the conclusion to Section 2. There

is a further similarity between these two section endings: the statement, 'He forgives whom he wills and he punishes whom he wills', which occurs in v18, is repeated in v40 but with the order of the verbs reversed, 'He punishes whom he wills and he forgives whom he wills'. Sections 3, 4 and 5 are thus framed by a series of inclusions. From this, we may infer that they should constitute a single sequence.

In v41, there is a change of addressee signalled by the vocative formula 'O Messenger'. By itself this need not necessarily indicate the onset of a new section. However, as we have already heard Section 5 draw to a close, there can be little doubt that this is the beginning of Section 6. The section is dominated by the verb *ḥakama*, 'to judge', which occurs 9 times in the simple form, as well as once in the derived form *ḥakkama*, 'to appoint as judge', and 4 times as the verbal noun *ḥukm*, 'judgement'. None of these forms is found in the previous section or the following section. A second key word is the verb *anzala*, 'to send down', which occurs eight times. The section is rounded off in v50 by two rhetorical questions, both of which include the word judgement.

Section 7 begins with a further change of addressee, signalled by the words 'O you who believe'. The section is dominated by a new key word: *awlīyā*?, 'patrons' or 'protecting friends', which occurs 4 times in the plural, with the singular form *walī* and the cognate verb *tawallā* each occurring once. The conclusion of the section is signalled by the presence of the words 'they take ... in mockery and as a sport' (*ittakhadhū ... huzuwan wa la'iban*) in both vv57 and 58.

The structure of Section 8 is highly complex. It begins, in v59, with yet another change of addressee, this time signalled by the words 'Say, "O People of the Scripture"'. The listener's initial impression is that the section terminates in v63, because v62 ends '... and their eating illicit gain, evil is what they have been doing' (*wa 'aklihimu 'l-sukhta labi'sa mākānū ya'malūn*) and these words are repeated at the end of the next *āya*, v63, except that *ya'malūn* is replaced by a synonym, *yasna'ūn*. However, as the recitation continues, it becomes clear that this repetition merely marks the conclusion of a subsection. The following *āya*, v64, is very long. It begins with an elegant sentence about the Jews that starts and finishes with the finite verb 'say' (*wa qālat/qālū*). This sentence, which we will analyse later, is the central hinge of the whole section. The remainder of v64, together with vv65 to 68, comprises a second subsection. This is signalled by an inclusion: the repetition of the sentence 'that which was sent down to thee from thy Lord will certainly increase many of them in contumacy and unbelief' (*wa layazīdanna kathīran minhum mā'unzila ilay'ka min rabbika ṭughyānan wa kufran*) which occurs near the beginning and the end. The cue for the eventual closure of the whole section is the repetition of the phrase 'the unbelieving people' at the end of vv67 and 68. In addition, v68 echoes

v59 with which the section commenced: both these *āyas* begin 'Say, "O People of the Scripture"' and both contain two references to 'what was sent down'. There are two further reasons for considering that vv59–68 constitute a single section. The first is the cohesive effect of this expression 'what was sent down' (*ma'anzila*): it occurs seven times in all but is absent from the adjacent sections. The second is the subtle contrast between the central hinge, which highlights what the Jews 'say' about Allāh, and the opening and closing *āyas*, in which Allāh instructs the Messenger concerning what he is to 'say' to the People of the Scripture.

In Section 9, the subject shifts to the presence of believers and unbelievers among the People of the Scripture. There is an element of repetition in vv83 and 84, which both contain the words 'of the truth' (*min al-ḥaqqi*), 'our Lord' (*rabbānā/rabbunā*) and 'with' (*ma'a*), from which one might infer that the section is drawing to a close. That this is the case is confirmed by the subsequent eschatological crescendo in v85, which is composed of stock phrases.

The eschatological note is continued in v86, which gives warning of Gehenna. As mentioned earlier, this whole *āya* is identical with v10.

There is a further change of addressee at the beginning of Section 10, signalled in v87 by the words 'O you who believe'. The endings of the antepenultimate and penultimate *āyas* of this long section exhibit repetition with variation: v106 ends 'for then we would surely be of the sinful' (*innā idhān lamin al-āthimīn*) and v107 ends 'for then we would surely be of the evildoers' (*innā idhān lamin al-zālimīn*). The rhyme clause of v108, the final *āya* of the section, has a different syntactic structure but it too ends with a plural participle denoting sinners: 'Allāh does not guide the transgressing people' (*Allāhu lā yahdī 'l-qawma 'l-fāsiqīn*).

The onset of Section 11, the last section, is signalled by a dramatic temporal shift, for the words 'On a day when Allāh gathers the messengers', at the beginning of v109, transport us in time to the Day of Resurrection. The grounds for holding that the whole of vv109–120 comprise a single section will be given later.

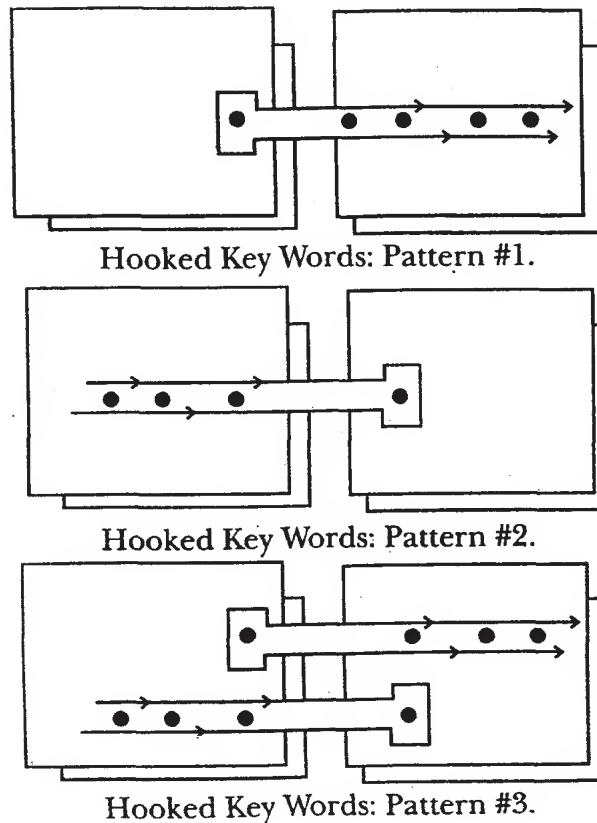
3. The Links between Consecutive Sections

We have seen that the end of one section and the beginning of the next is invariably indicated by at least one verbal cue, and sometimes by several. Nevertheless, it will emerge on closer examination that each section is usually linked to its predecessor in such a way that the transition between them is relatively smooth. In some instances the link is thematic. In most, however, one or more text-linguistic devices are employed. G. H. Guthrie, an American biblical scholar, has detected similar devices in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. I shall therefore adopt his terminology and modify it where this seems appropriate.¹²

Section 1 ends in v9 with Allāh's promise of a reward for the believers. The warning in v10 that the unbelievers are destined for Gehenna is stated in antithesis to this.

Section 2 is linked to Section 1 by what Guthrie calls 'hooked key words'. These may be of three types and are represented diagrammatically in Figure 2. In pattern #1, a characteristic term of a section is introduced near the end of the section that precedes it. In pattern #2, on the contrary, a characteristic term of a section is repeated at the beginning of the section that follows it. In pattern #3, both these types of repetition are present. It is pattern #3 that we have here. The word 'covenant' (*mīthāq*) is a characteristic term in Section 2, where it occurs in vv12, 13 and 14, but it is introduced in Section 1, in v7. The expression 'O you who believe' (*yā'ayyūhā 'lādhihīna āmanū*) is a characteristic term of Section 1, where it occurs in vv1, 2, 6 and 8, but it is repeated at the beginning of Section 2, in v11. The expression 'and be mindful of Allāh' (*wa'ttaqū 'llāha*) which occurs in vv2, 4, 7 and 8, is likewise repeated in v11.

Figure 2: Hooked Key Words



Sections 2 and 3 have 'parallel introductions'. This too is a device identified by Guthrie. It involves effecting a transition by employing roughly parallel statements at the beginning of two consecutive sections. Section 2 begins with v11, 'O you who believe; remember Allāh's favour unto you when a people ...'. Section 3 begins with v20, 'And when Moses said unto his people, "O my people, remember Allāh's favour unto you when..."'. Note that in this instance, the two main elements in the parallel statement are presented in inverse order: in v11, the word 'people' (*qawm*) comes after the words 'Remember Allāh's favour unto you when', whereas in v20 it comes before them. An inversion of this type was mentioned earlier in connection with the concluding *āyas* of Sections 2 and 5. We shall encounter others in due course.

Sections 3 and 4 are contrasting stories, both featuring two brothers. In Section 3, Moses says to his Lord that he only has control over his own soul or self (*nafs* v25) and over his brother. In Section 4, the murderer's soul or self (*nafs* v30) gets the better of him so that he finds it easy to kill his brother.

Sections 4 and 5 are linked by what Guthrie calls 'hook-words'. That is to say, a smooth transition is effected by the use of the same word at the end of one section and the beginning of the next. In this instance the hook-word is the expression 'corruption in the land', which occurs in the last *āya* of Section 4 and first *āya* of Section 5. In Arabic the transition is particularly elegant because the word order is inverted: v32 *fasādīn fī 'l-arḍi*, v33 *fī 'l-arḍi fasādan*.

Sections 5 and 6 have parallel introductions, although in this instance it is the endings of their opening *āyas* that resemble one another. V33, the opening *āya* of Section 4, ends:

Theirs will be ignominy in the world (*khizyun fī 'l-dunyā*) and theirs
in the hereafter a mighty punishment.

V41, the opening *āya* of Section 5, ends in the same way except that the order of 'ignominy' and 'in the world' is inverted (*fī 'l-dunyā khizyun*). In addition, the two sections are linked by a modified form of what Guthrie calls hooked key-words pattern #1. We noted earlier that the key word in Section 5 is the verb *ḥakama*, 'to judge', and its derivatives. We also stated that none of the forms found there occur in the previous section. However, v38 ends with another word derived from this root: *ḥakīm*, an attribute of Allāh. It is usually rendered in English as 'Wise' or 'All-wise' but 'Judicious' would be a more appropriate translation in this context because reference to this divine attribute paves the way for Section 6 which stresses the importance of judging in accordance with divine revelation.

Section 6 begins, in v41, with the words 'O Messenger do not let those who vie with one another in unbelief sadden thee'. Section 8 ends, in v68, with what amounts to

the same command couched in different language, 'Do not grieve over the unbelieving people'. Thus, despite the intervening changes in addressee, Sections 6, 7 and 8 combine to form a single sequence. A second cohesive factor is the repetition of rare words. The word *yusāri'ūn* ('they vie with one another', 'they race one another') occurs with negative connotations in all three sections but only once elsewhere in the Qur'an.¹³ The word *suht* ('illicit gain') is attested once in Section 6 and twice in Section 8 but nowhere else.¹⁴ This is also the case with the expression *al-rabbānīyūn wa 'l-aḥbār* ('the rabbis and scholars').¹⁵ In addition Sections 6 and 8 are linked by what one might call distant key-words. In Section 6, God twice says *anzalnā* ('we sent down')¹⁶ and there are six references to *mā anzala 'llāh* ('what Allāh sent down').¹⁷ The verb is absent from Section 7, but recurs seven times in Section 8, where it is always in the passive voice as *mā unzila* ('what was sent down').¹⁸

Section 8 ends, in v68, by referring to those of the People of the Scripture who failed to establish the Torah and the Gospel as 'the unbelieving people'. Section 9 begins, in v69, by acknowledging that there are nonetheless some Jews, Christians and Sabaeans, who are believers. There is thus an obvious thematic link.

The last four *āya* of Section 9, vv82–85, mention Christians who acknowledge the truth of what has been sent down, ending with an assurance that Allāh will reward them. The warning, already encountered in v10, that the unbelievers are destined for Gehenna, is stated again in v86 in antithesis to this.

Near the end of Section 9, in v84, some who called themselves Christians are credited with saying 'why should we not believe (*nu'min*) in Allāh and that which has come unto us of the truth?'. Section 10 begins, in v87, with the words, 'O you who believe (*āmanū*)' and the next *āya* refers to 'Allāh in whom you are believers (*mu'minūn*)'. Here, the repetition of words from the same verbal root functions in much the same way as a hook-word. For readers who are immersed in the thought-world of the Qur'an, there is an additional link between the two sections, which is furnished by the connotations of the words *ruḥbān* ('monks'), in v82, and *ṭayyibāt* ('good things'), in v87. Q.57:27, which might well be a summary restatement of Q.5:46, 66 and 82–87, passes favourable judgement on those of Jesus' followers who are believers, but then criticises *rahbāniyya* ('monasticism') as something that they themselves invented seeking Allāh's pleasure. Christian monasticism invariably entailed celibacy, but according to Q.5:5, all 'good things' have been made lawful for the believers and these include marital relations with virtuous women. Thus the first half of v87, which commands those who believe not to forbid the good things that Allāh has made lawful for them, is an appropriate sequel to what is said about Christians in vv82–85.

To the casual reader, it might seem that there is a hiatus between the last two sections of the Sūra, for they are not linked by any of the text-linguistic devices that we

encountered. Moreover, Section 10 comprises exhortation and legislation for the believers, given in the context of a visit to the inviolable sanctuary, whereas Section 11 is concerned with the Day of Resurrection, when the messengers will be questioned about the response to their preaching. Rather than a hiatus, I would prefer to speak of a dramatic scene shift. From the Qur'anic perspective, this corresponds to the scene shift that all human beings will eventually experience for themselves; for when they are raised from the dead they will think that the interval between their death and resurrection was very short (Q.20:103, 23:112–14, 26:35). The coming shift in scene is hinted at in the course of Section 10. A visit to the inviolable sanctuary is a preparation for the ultimate post-mortem journey into God's presence, as is clearly stated in v96, where the believers are exhorted to be mindful of Allāh 'to whom you will be gathered'. Moreover, the section ends in vv106–108 by instructing the believers to have their bequests witnessed 'when death draws near to one of you.'

4. Chiasmus as a Stylistic Feature and Chiasmus as an Organisational Principle

As mentioned earlier, Section 8 has a remarkable sentence as its central hinge. It occurs at the beginning of v64 and runs as follows

*Wa qālati 'l-yahūdu yadu 'llāhi maghlūlatun
Ghullat aydihim wa lu'īnū bi mā qālū*

In the following translation, the Arabic word order has been preserved and different print types have been used in order to highlight the structure:

And say THE JEWS,¹⁹ 'The hand of Allāh is fettered';
fettered are their hands AND THEY ARE CURSED for what say
they.²⁰

The sentence exhibits chiasmus or crossed symmetry. If we work inwards from the two extremities, we encounter the verbal equivalent of a set of 4 Chinese boxes nesting inside each other. The initial 'And say' corresponds to the final 'say they' as A to A'. (The Arabic is even more elegant because the sentence begins with the conjunction *wa-* and ends with the third-person plural verb ending *-ū*, both of which would be written as *w* in an unvocalised text.) Next, 'the Jews' corresponds to 'and they are cursed' as B to B'. Then 'the hand of Allāh' corresponds to 'their hands' as C to C'. Finally 'is fettered' corresponds to 'are fettered' as D to D'. The sentence thus has the structure ABCDD'C'B'A'. Note that although there is no morphological connection between the words 'the Jews' and 'cursed', the rhetorical effect of the chiasmus is to predispose the reader to accept the correctness of the Qur'anic verdict. There is also an element of wordplay: the Arabic word for 'hand', *yad*, looks and sounds like

a contraction of *yahūd*, 'Jews', whereas *aydihim*, 'their hands', contains the same three consonants as *yahūd* but in a different order.

Section 8 includes another sentence containing a chiasmus. It occurs only a few lines later, at the beginning of v67:

*yā'ayyuhā 'l-rasūlu balligh mā unzila ilayka min rabbika
wa inlam taf'al fa mā ballaghta risālatahu*

O Messenger DELIVER *that which (mā)* was sent down unto thee from thy Lord and if thou do not thou wilt *not (mā)* **HAVE DELIVERED his message.**

The initial 'O Messenger' corresponds to the final 'his message', where the pronominal suffix *-hu* ('his') elegantly mirrors the syllable *uh* in the vocative particle. The imperative 'deliver' corresponds to the finite verb 'have delivered'. Finally, the relative pronoun 'that which' corresponds to the negative particle 'not' which is its homonym in Arabic. Note that in this instance the middle section of the sentence is not involved in the chiasmus. The structure may thus be summarised as ABC ... C'B'A'.

In addition to being a stylistic device at the level of the sentence, chiasmus is an important organisational principle at other levels and serves to build up an overall effect. On a number of occasions already, I have drawn attention to the way in which a phrase that occurs in one *āya* is repeated several *āyas* later but with the order of the words inverted. For instance 'ignominy in the world' (*khizyun fi'l-dunyā*) first occurs in v33 but is repeated in v41 as 'in the world ignominy' (*fi 'l-dunyā khizyun*). This is an example of chiasmus at the level of adjacent sections. It has the structure AB ... B'A'. Similarly, three consecutive clauses that occur in the course of v18 are repeated in v40, but in reverse order:

He forgives whom He wills and He punishes whom he wills. Allāh's
is the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth
.....
..... Allāh's is the sovereignty of
the heavens and the earth. **He punishes whom he wills and He
forgives whom He wills.**

This is an example of chiasmus framing a sequence composed of several sections. It has the structure ABC ... C'B'A'.

The highest level of organisation is that of the overall plan which embraces all eleven sections. We shall see that there is abundant evidence that Section 1 corresponds to Section 10; that the first warning of Gehenna corresponds to the second; and that

Section 2 corresponds to Section 9. If that were all, we would have the structural equivalent of the second of the chiasmic sentences that we analysed earlier. We will maintain, however, that there are a sufficient number of verbal cues to warrant the conclusion that all eleven sections are interrelated chiasmatically.

5. The Lexical Evidence for Chiasmus at the Level of the Macrostructure

For didactic purposes, when discussing the sentences that exhibited a chiasmic structure we began at their extremities and worked inwards. This approach might, however, be thought misleading if we employed it when examining the macrostructure of the *Sūra* because one would normally hear the sections recited in their correct order. To pre-empt this criticism, we will begin with Section 6, and demonstrate that it corresponds to Section 5; then proceed to Section 7 and demonstrate that it corresponds to Section 4; and so forth. Moreover, in order to guard against allegations of subjectivity or reading ideas into the text, we will at this stage focus primarily on the lexical evidence.

In the proposed plan, Section 6 corresponds to Section 5 as E' to E. Whereas Section 5 prescribes punishments for antisocial crimes, Section 6 urges the Messenger to give judgement in accordance with what has been sent down as revelation. Because these two sections are located at the centre of the chiasmic structure, they occur consecutively. Therefore, the lexical evidence of how they correspond to one another has been reviewed already. It was mentioned that they have parallel introductions with the last part of v41 repeating the last part of v33 almost verbatim. We also saw that the emphasis on judging in accordance with revelation corresponded to the earlier description of Allāh as *Hakīm*.

Section 7 corresponds to Section 4 as D' to D. As mentioned earlier, Section 4 is a brief narrative about how one of Adam's sons killed his own brother, to which is appended a reference to Mishnaic teaching about the sanctity of human life. The last three *āyas* of the narrative portion end as follows:

(29)and that is the recompense of the wrongdoers (*wa dhālika jazā'u 'l-ẓālimīn*)

(30) His soul made killing his brother easy for him. So he killed him and he

became of the losers (*fa ṭawwa'at la hu nafsahu qatla akhīhi fa qatalahu fa aṣbaḥa min al-khāsirīn*)

(31) ... and he became of the regretful (*fa aṣbaḥa min al-nādimīn*)

To the casual reader, Section 7 might seem very different because it is an exhortation to the believers not to take the People of the Scripture as their protecting allies.

However, its first three *āyas* end in a remarkably similar way to those we have just examined:

(51)Allāh will not guide the people of the wrongdoers (*innā 'llāha lā yahdī 'l-qawma 'l-zālimīn*)

(52) ... And they will become, because of what they kept secret in their souls, regretful (*fa yuṣbiḥū 'alā mā asarrū fī anfusihim nādimīn*)

(53) ... And they have become losers (*fa aṣbahū khāsirīn*)

Although the language is formulaic, there is no other instance in the Qur'an of the words *zālimīn*, *khāsirīn* and *nādimīn* occurring as the rhyme words in three consecutive *āyas*.²¹ Moreover, the reference to the role of the *nafs* (the 'soul') in both v30 and v52 is striking. The believers were surely meant to infer that the Jews of Arabia, some of whom had stretched forth their hands against them on a previous occasion (Q.5:11 compare Q.5:28), were false brothers and potential fratricides.

Section 8, which is designated C' in the plan, corresponds to Section 3, which is designated C. Section 8 focuses on the conflict between the Messenger of Allāh and the Jews, whereas Section 3 is a brief narrative about Moses and difficulty he had with the Children of Israel. Vv25 and 26, the last *āyas* of Section 3, both end with a reference to Moses' people as 'the transgressing people' (*al-qawmi 'l-fāsiqīn*). This is taken up in v59, the first *āya* of Section 8, which ends with the suggestion that the People of the Scripture's opposition to the believers stemmed in part from the fact that most of them were 'transgressors' (*fāsiqūn*). To those who are familiar with the Bible, there are several other indicators that Section 8 depicts the Messenger as a prophet like Moses. However, we will refrain from mentioning them here and focus exclusively on the lexical evidence for correlating the two sections. In vv23-34 Moses' people insist that they do not want to fight and will not enter the land until its inhabitants go out from it. The same two verbs *dakhala*, 'to enter' and *kharaja*, 'to go out' are elsewhere attested together only in v61. Section 3 ends, in v26, with Allāh telling Moses, 'Do not grieve over the transgressing people' (*fa lā ta'sa 'alā 'l-qawmi 'l-fāsiqīn*). Section 8 ends, in v68, with him saying something very similar to the Messenger, 'Do not grieve over the unbelieving people' (*fa lā ta'sa 'alā 'l-qawm 'l-kāfirīn*).²²

The correspondence between Sections 9 and 2, that are designated B' and B in the plan, is more striking because both sections obviously have similar subject matter. Moreover, they both contain two word sequences not attested elsewhere in the Qur'an:

- 'those who say, "We are Christians"' (*alladhīna qālū innā naṣārā*) v14; repeated verbatim in v82.

- 'They certainly disbelieve who say Allāh is the Messiah Son of Mary' (*laqad kafara 'l-ladhīna qālū inna 'llāha huwa 'l-masīhu 'bnu maryama*) v17; repeated verbatim in v72.

There is also a statement not found elsewhere that is repeated with only slight variation:

- 'And Allāh made a covenant with the Children of Israel' (*wa laqad akhadha 'llāhu mīthāqa banū isrā'īl*) v12; compare 'We made a covenant with the Children of Israel' (*laqad akhadhnā mīthāqa banū isrā'īl*) v70.

In addition there is a relatively common expression that occurs in both sections but not elsewhere in the *Sūra*:

- 'he has strayed from the right way' (*fa qad ḍalla sawā'a 'l-sabīl*) v12; compare 'and they strayed from the right way' (*wa ḍallū'an sawā'i 'l-sabīl*) v77.²³

Section 9 is followed, in v86, by a warning of Gehenna. This corresponds to the identical warning in v10, which precedes Section 2.

Section 10 corresponds to Section 1, which is why in the plan they are labelled A' and A. Both imply a setting in the vicinity of the inviolable sanctuary. Moreover, these two sections have in common a number of words and phrases that do not occur elsewhere in the *Sūra*:

- derivatives of *ʿaqada*, 'to knot', 'to contract': v1 *ʿuqūd*, 'obligations; compare v87 *ʿaqadtum*, 'you contracted'
- derivatives of *ḥalla*, 'to be lawful', 'to be loosed': v1 *uḥillat*, *ghayra muḥillī*; v2 *lā uḥillū*, *ḥallaltum*; v4 *uḥilla* (twice); v5 *uḥilla*, *ḥill* (twice); compare v87 *aḥalla*, v88 *ḥalāl*, v96 *uḥilla*
- *anʿām*, 'grazing livestock' v1; compare v95 *naʿam* (the singular form)
- derivatives of *ṣāda* 'to hunt': v1 *ṣayd*, v2 *faʿṣṭādū*; compare vv94, 95, 96 *ṣayd*
- *wa antum ḥurumun*, 'when you are in pilgrim sanctity' v1, compare v95
- *saʿala*, 'to ask' v1; compare v101 (both with reference to asking the Messenger for oracles)
- *al-shahra 'l-ḥarāma... al-hadya... al-qalā'ida* 'the sacred month...the gifts...the garlands' v2; compare v97²⁴
- *al-bayta 'l-ḥarāma*, 'the sacred house' v2; compare v97
- *ṣadda*, 'hinder', 'prevent' v2; compare v91 (both with reference to religious observance)
- *an taʿtadū*, 'so that you commit aggression' v2; compare *lā taʿtadu*, 'do not commit aggression', v86
- *shadīdu 'l-ʿiqāb* 'severe in retribution' v2; compare v98
- *nuṣub*, 'standing stone', 'idol' v3; compare the plural form *anṣāb* v90²⁵

- *azlām*, 'divining arrows' v3; compare v90²⁶
- derivatives of *ṭāba*, 'to be good': vv4, 5 *al-ṭayyibāt*, v6 *ṭayyib*; compare v87 *ṭayyibāt*, vv88 and 100 *ṭayyib*.
- derivatives of *ka'aba*: v6 'l-*ka'bayn*, 'to the ankles'; compare v95 *bāligha* 'l-*ka'batī*, 'to reach the Kaaba'
- derivatives of *janaba*, 'to avert': v6 *junuban*, 'in a state of ritual impurity': compare v90 *fa 'jtanibūhu*, 'so avoid it'
- *la'allakum tashkurūn*, 'that you may give thanks' v6; compare v89
- *aṭā'a*, 'obey' v7; cp v92
- derivatives of *'adala*, 'to act equitably': v8 *ta'dilū*, *I'dilū*; compare v95 *dhawā 'adlin*, *'adl*, v106 *dhawā 'adlin*.
- *bi mā ta'malūn*, v8 'what you do' ; compare *bi mā kuntum ta'malūn*, 'what you used to do' v105.

In addition note the following that occur only occasionally elsewhere in the *Sūra*:

- derivatives of *qasama*, 'to divide': v3 *tastaqsimū*; compare vv106, 107 *yuqsimāni* (elsewhere only v53 *aqsamū*)
- *ṣalāt*, 'prayer' v6; compare vv91, v106 (elsewhere only in vv12, 55 and 58).

There remains only the eleventh and final section of the *Sūra*. We have seen that Sections 6-10 follow Sections 1-5 and correspond to them but in reverse order. This may be summarised by saying that the sections are arranged in the order A B C D E E' D' C' B' A'. With the tenth section in place, it might seem that the pattern is complete because we are back to where we started. However, the tenth section, A', which closes the loop, might also be regarded as generating a new beginning. This accords with the dramatic shift in scene that transports the audience proleptically to the Day of Resurrection. For this reason, Section 11 has been designated B". Like Sections 2 and 9 – B and B' in the plan – Section 11 focuses on the Messiah Son of Mary and false beliefs about him. After v109, which serves to indicate the shift in scene, v110 runs as follows:

When Allāh says, 'O Jesus Son of Mary; remember my favour unto thee and thy mother ... when I held back (*kafaftu*) the Children of Israel from thee....

In the above quotation, the long middle section has been omitted in order to highlight the similarity with v11, the first *āya* of Section 2

O you who believe; remember Allāh's favour unto you, when a people purposed to stretch against you their hands and He held back (*kaffa*) their hands from you....

The occurrence in both passages of the verb *kaffa* ('to hold back'), with Allāh as the grammatical subject, is particularly significant as there are only three other instances of this in the Qur'an (Q.4:84, 48:20 and 48:24). There is a verbal echo of Section 2 in the body of Section 11. According to v12, when Allāh established the covenant with the Children of Israel, he issued a warning

Whoever of you disbelieves after that (*fa man kafara ba'ada dhālika minkum*) will have strayed from the right way.

A similar but direr warning is given to Jesus' disciples in v115, in connection with the sending down of the table

Whoever of you disbelieves afterwards (*fa man yakfur ba'adu minkum*) I shall punish with a punishment with which I punish no other being.

There is also an echo of Section 9. In v72, we are informed that Jesus' message was, 'Worship Allāh, my Lord and your Lord'. In v116, he himself reiterates this when he is arraigned before Allāh. Moreover in Section 11 there is an instance of the relatively common phrase 'gardens beneath which rivers flow' (v119), which occurs in Section 2 and Section 9 (vv12 and 85) but nowhere else in the *Sūra*. Finally, Section 11 ends with multiple echoes of the end of Section 2. The statements 'Allāh's is the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth' and 'Allāh is able to do all things' are repeated verbatim (v120 compare vv17–19). The words 'He forgives whom He wills and He punishes whom He wills' (v18) are not repeated although there is a clear allusion to them when Jesus says, 'If Thou punish them they are Thy servants, and if Thou forgive them, Thou art the Mighty, the Judicious' (v118).

6. Concluding Remarks

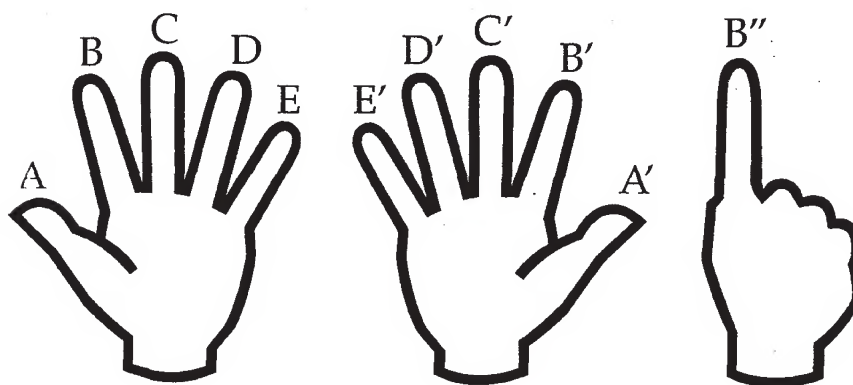
Although we have shown that the *Sūra* is not simply a basket of leftovers, the reader may feel that we have merely replaced the notion of a single large basket with that of eleven smaller baskets linked together in various ways and arranged in a rather unusual pattern. In the sequel to this article, we will therefore examine the individual sections in greater detail, and discuss the stages in the production of the *Sūra* and whether in its present form it constitutes a single coherent discourse.

Throughout this article, for reasons that were given in the introduction, we have endeavoured to make our analysis as objective as possible. We shall, never the less, end on a more speculative note. To those unfamiliar with chiasmus, the structure that we have detected in *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* may seem bizarre. The basic plan is, however, not that strange. Even today, one could imagine a speaker making five main points and then running through them again and amplifying each in turn, before repeating the most important point by way of conclusion. If for points we substitute sections,

this in essence is what we have. Moreover it helps explain why each of Sections 6 to 10 is longer than its counterpart in the first part of the *Sūra*.

There are, however, two features that call for further explanation. First, the repetition of the five points in reverse order. This probably originates in the practice of counting on the fingers. The easiest way of keeping tally is with the palms upwards and starting with the thumb of the left hand. If the thumb is 1 or A, the index finger will be 2 or B, the middle finger 3 or C, the ring finger 4 or D, and the little finger 5 or E.²⁷ Then, when you continue with the right hand, the order will be reversed, because the hands are mirror images of one another. That is to say, you will begin with the little finger, 6 or E', and end with the thumb, 10 or A', as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Counting the Sections on the Fingers



The other puzzling feature is the existence of an eleventh section, B'', that corresponds to the second and ninth sections, B and B'. We tentatively suggest that this too may be rooted in human anatomy, for a speaker who wishes to emphasise a point that he is making often gesticulates with the index finger of his right hand. Moreover, it is this finger that Muslims extend when testifying to the unity of God. The issue of the divine unity surfaces in Section 2 in connection with the false beliefs of the Christians about Jesus, the Messiah Son of Mary. It is emphasised in Sections 9 and 11 where, as we have seen, these false beliefs are refuted by referring to Jesus' own teaching.

NOTES

1 I wish to thank Angelika Neuwirth and Danielle Robinson for their comments on the first draft of this article. An abridged version was delivered at SOAS on 7 December 2000, as the second Annual Lecture of the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*.

2 See e.g. H. Bobzin, *Der Koran: Eine Einführung* (Munich: Beck, 1999), p. 21; A. T. Welch, 'Sūra' in C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs and the late G. Lecomte (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New edition (Leiden: Brill, 1997) Volume IX, pp. 885–892; and

A. Neuwirth, 'Von Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon' in S. Wild, (ed.) *The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 69–105, especially p. 98 where she describes the long *sūras* as 'collection baskets' ("Sammelkörbe" – printed as here between double inverted commas). However, Neuwirth's position is not clear-cut – see note 6 below.

3 Author of an 8-volume commentary in Urdu: Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, Vols. 1–2 (Lahore: Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah, 1967–71, Vols. 3–4 (Lahore: Anjuman-I Khuddām-ul-Qur'ān 1973–76), Vols. 5–8 (Lahore: Fārān Foundation, 1977–1980). For a sympathetic account of Iṣlāḥī's work see M. Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986) and 'The *sūra* as a unity: a twentieth century development in *Qur'ān* exegesis' in G. R. Hawting and A-K. A. Shareef, A-K. (eds.) *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 211–224.

4 Welch, 'Sūra', p. 888.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM, 1996), pp. 201–223. As far as I am aware, Matthias Zahniser is the only other Western scholar who has challenged the consensus. See his 'Sūra as Guidance and Exhortation: The Composition of *Sūrat al-Nisā'* in A. Afsaruddin and A. H. M. Zahniser (eds.) *Humanism, Culture and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 71–85. After reading a draft of Zahniser's article, Neuwirth added a footnote to her own work (Neuwirth 'Von Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon', p. 98) in which she acknowledged that he had shown that it is worth trying to discover the basic structure of the long *sūras*.

7 I took Iṣlāḥī's analysis, as summarised in Mir, 'The *sūra* as a unity' pp. 215–217, as my starting point. I adopted his division of the *sūra* into six sections, but I located the end of Section 3 at v152 whereas he extended it to v162. On the relative merits of these divisions, see A. H. M. Zahniser, 'Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long *Sūras*: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā'*' in I. J. Boullata (ed.) *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), pp. 26–55. Judging by my current research on *al-Mā'ida*, the so-called 'sections' of *al-Baqara* may prove to be sequences each of which is composed of several sections.

8 Double diagonal slashes are used to indicate that Sections 2, 5 and 11 each end with a similar accumulation of theological formulae.

9 Single diagonal slashes are used to show that Sections 6, 7 and 8 form a larger sequence.

10 All quotations from the Qur'an are the author's own rendering of the standard Egyptian text.

11 Compare *Mishnah: Sanhedrin* 4:5, English translation in H. Danby, *The Mishnah, Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: OUP, 1933), p388

12 G. H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-linguistic Analysis* (PhD Dissertation: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991). My knowledge of this work is based on the summary in W. L. Lane, *Word Bible Commentary 47A: Hebrews 1–8* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), pp. xc–xcviii. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* is an anonymous document, written in Greek in the first century C. E. It is part of the canon of the New Testament.

13 In vv41, 52 and 62; compare Q3:176. In addition, there are three passages where it refers to those who vie with each other in good works: Q3:114, 21:90 and 23:61.

14 In vv42 and 62–3.

15 In vv44 and 64. There is a reference to *rabbāniyyīn* in Q3:79, and *aḥbār* are mentioned in Q9:31 and 9:34.

16 In vv44 and 48.

17 In vv44, 45, 47, 48, and 49bis.

18 In vv59bis, 64, 66, 67, 68bis.

19 i.e. 'The Jews say'

20 i.e. 'they say'. In Arabic 'they' is indicated by the verb ending.

21 The forms *ẓālimīn* and *khāsirīn* are relatively common. They are attested ninety-one times and eighteen times respectively, although not always as rhyme words. However, *nādimīn* is rarer, and is attested a total of five times: Q.5:31, 5:52, 23:40, 26:157, and 49:6.

22 The verb is attested elsewhere only in Q.7:93 and 57:23 where different forms are employed.

23 A similar expression is attested in v60: 'further astray from the right path', *aḍalla 'an sawā'i 'l-sabīli*.

24 The 'sacred month' is mentioned in Q.2:194 and Q.2:217; 'gifts' are mentioned three times in Q.2:196; but there is no other instance of 'garlands'.

25 The only other instance in the Qur'an is of the singular at Q.70:43.

26 Only here in the Qur'an.

27 The letters A, B, C etc. have, of course, been used for the convenience of English readers.